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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the characteristics of inner-city, deprived children which cause learning difficulties; the characteristics of typical basal readers which cause problems for these children; conditions which promote optimal learning; and practical suggestions for instruction. The areas of learning difficulty for the children discussed include listening, speaking, reading, lack of experiences, high mobility, immediate physical needs, and abstractions. The characteristics of basal readers discussed which cause learning problems include the vocabulary load placed on the child, deferring the teaching of vowel sounds to second grade, lack of sufficient practice in skills learned in different settings, gaps in instruction, teaching too many things at once, and dependence on assumptive teaching. Conditions discussed which promote optimal learning include the presentation of tasks in segments, teaching in the easiest possible sequence, progression determined by mastery, transfer of skills, repetition of learned skills, and immediate and valued reinforcement. Practical suggestions for instruction include the use of the language experience approach, which can involve teaching phonics and word recognition skills to avoid many of the problems present in basal readers. (WR)

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"Reading Methods in Urban Disadvantaged Schools: What Really Works in Primary Grades?"

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" Reading Methods in Urban Disadvantaged Schools: What Really Works in Primary Grades?"

by

Lillian R. Putnam

An increasing number of deprived children in our inner cities are remedial readers by the middle of first grade. The cumulative deficit begins here. Apparently what we have done and are presently doing is unsuccessful. The increased time devoted to remedial reading is not alleviating the situation. We need qualitative changes not simply quantitative changes. For too long the emphasis of our concern has been on the remediation of reading disabilities. The time is indeed late but we should prevent many of these disabilities by better instruction in the classroom. We should be concerned with the selection of the best methods and materials. Twenty years of experience with these problems have led the writer to express the following ideas. Most of these ideas are based on practical experience in classrooms; others are supported by various studies.

This paper discusses four facets of the problem: the characteristics of inner-city, deprived children which cause learning difficulties, the characteristics of typical basal readers which cause problems for these children, conditions which promote optimal learning, and practical suggestions for instruction.

I. Characteristics of Deprived, Inner-City Children Which Cause Learning Problems.

A. Listening - They are accustomed to hearing short commands in contrast to the lengthy paragraphs of explanation given in school. Their attention in listening is usually short and they are easily distracted.

B. Speaking - If they are unaccustomed to hearing the sound, they fail to speak it and vice versa: e.g.: th becomes f as in mouf; diphthongs become monothongs, boy - bo. Many of the dialectical differences are also reflected in their problems of auditory discrimination, for example the dropping a final consonants, des for desk. Thus the child's phonological system, although intact and effective for him, does not match the commonly accepted phoneme - grapheme system presented in traditional readers. Although linguists claim that no regional dialect has a perfect match, these children are burdened with maximal differences.

The vocabulary used by these children is rich, colorful and effective, as shown by Roberts (7). It has however distinct meanings: "big juice" - a white racketeer; "happy shop" - a liquor store; "stumpers" - shoes; "laid in the aisle" - well dressed. The writer has sat in first grade classrooms and listened to children talk in "show and tell". Because of the different dialects and vocabulary used, it was frequently impossible to understand what the children were saying. But if the teacher and school denigrate the child's speaking vocabulary and dialect, an immediate psychological barrier is erected which seems to impede instruction.

When items vulnerable to dialect changes are removed from reading tests, the scores of deprived children are less depressed. Hutchinson (4) scored Metropolitan Reading Tests given to second grade black children in Washington, D.C. Forty per cent of the children scored below grade level and twenty per cent scored one full year below grade level. After removing items vulnerable to dialect biases, she found on the second scoring that only twenty-six per cent of the children were below grade level, and only six per cent of the children were one full year below grade level.

C. Reading - The structural, grammatical and syntactical differences in their speech are not reflected in typical reading material. Since the teaching of readings rests on a basis of oral language, the conflict is evident. Grammatical differences are most evident:

1. Verb usage - He go.
2. Present habitual - He be doing it.
3. Repetition of subject - My mother, she be here.
4. Passessive - Mary paper.
5. Double negative - I ain't got no pencil.
6. Omission of copula verb - - she listening in present progressive tense

D. EXPERIENCES - There is a lack of familiarity with experiences and concepts which are expected in basal readers. Labov (5) corrects the belief that they "lack experiences", and shows that they have rather different kinds of experiences. The majority of children in many classes have not travelled beyond the school, apartment block and local grocery store.

E. MOBILITY - On the other hand, the high mobility of families within the city subjects these children to a variety of materials and methods as they change from one school to another. Therefore, the demands of one method fail to fulfill those of another and few things get learned well. If a child is taught with the Lippincott Series in September in grade one, and moves in January to another school using the Scott-Foresman Series, he is in trouble. The Scott-Foresman Series is based on a sight vocabulary, which he doesn't have.

F. IMMEDIATE PHYSICAL NEEDS - The immediate physical needs of basic food and shelter are so strong that the psychological reward of a teacher's smile of approval is of minimal effect. These children need immediate feedback about success; they cannot wait for delayed reinforcement.

G. ABSTRACTIONS - Although most learning proceeds from the concrete to the abstract, their abstracts are different - more things are abstractions to them. "So they need more concrete-less", as Taba (8) expresses it.

II. CHARACTERISTICS OF BASAL READERS WHICH CAUSE PROBLEMS.

Why do the children fail the books? We should reverse this question and ask, "Why do the books fail the children?" In typical basal readers:

A. Early word recognition in initial months of Grade I is heavily based on total configuration, context or pictorial clue. As the vocabulary load increases, the child cannot remember and is forced to guess. This reduces his dependence on his own skills and reinforces his feelings of inadequacy. Thus the

fetters are forged. Word identification based on pictorial clues seems to have minimal transfer to new words.

B. Teaching vowel sounds is largely deferred to Grade II; this reduces the use of word recognition skills by forcing over reliance on configuration and context clues.

C. Basals depende heavily on spoken language and concepts developed in pre-school years. The language in reading materials is very similar to the spoken language used by less deprived children. As previously discussed, the oral language used by inner-city children is very different from that used in reading materials; it is less like the written language in syntax, grammar and structure. Thus one should expect relatively less positive transfer from their verbal experiences to the formal language of books. For inner-city children, reading and writing with traditional texts is different from their natural speech. "Middle class language is more flexible, detached and subtle in descriptive aspects" (Bernstein, 1.). Labov (5), however, believes that the traditional texts can be read and pronounced in dialect. To the writer, this idea seems to be slightly meretricious in beginning instruction.

D. Basals fail to give sufficient practice and exercise in skills learned in different settings. Deutsch, Katz and Jensen (2) speak of the "hierarchy of pre-requisite learning". Basals fail to build steps in that hierarchy. These children need skills to "learn how to learn". These same authors cite a study showing that children from low-class Mexican groups did poorly in paired -associated learning, but better than their

Anglo counterparts in serial learning. But paired-associate learning tasks depend on past verbal experiences while serial learning tends to reflect a more basic cognitive ability. Basals rely heavily on paired-associate learning tasks.

E. Basals leave gaps in instruction and in the thinking processes which they expect the child to know or supply himself. Deprived children lack the expected verbal skills to do what is expected. However, they can do them if the skills are taught.

F. Basals attempt too much; they try to teach too many things at once, so the child can't select the facal points. A fifteen minute discussion of concepts presented in four lines of print gives him a vast kaleidoscope of new learnings. He can't determine or select the relevant task being stressed. To teach simple decoding skills is sufficient at first. We should teach a few things well so he can lean on them.

G. The typical basal stresses an analytic method. It starts with a whole word and breaks it down to teach the phonic generalizations. This leans toward inductive teaching, starting with examples and drawing out the generalization. Many children do not and cannot learn by this method. The low reading scores of our inner-city children are ample proof of this. We cannot depend on assumptive teaching.

III. Conditions Which Promote Optimal Learning

Practical work in classrooms with teachers in many schools in varied urban centers has convinced the writer that good reading instruction can occur and be effective. The basic requirement is that we as teachers must be cognizant of the problems listed above and be flexible enough to cope with them.

Inner-city children seem to learn best and most easily when and where:

1. each task is presented in "bite-sized chunks" - like Shredded Wheat. They need to be assured of success before starting the task.
2. teaching is done in the easiest possible sequential order.
3. each step is based on mastery of the previous one.
4. physical action is involved to cause initial attention and participation. One child expressed it well by saying, "If you tell me, I might remember; if you show me I might understand; if you have me do it, I can make it my own."
5. opportunity is provided to use skills in many different settings.
6. opportunity is provided for "over learning" and for the satisfaction derived from the repetition of learned skills.
7. teachers recognize the strengths, consistency and richness of black vernacular English and have the wisdom to teach Standard English as a second language.
8. teachers accept black vernacular English and the child who uses it as different - not as wrong - not as inferior.
9. reinforcement is immediate and valued

IV. Practical Suggestions

There is not one method or material in existence that will correct all the problems listed above or will provide the optimal learning conditions. Our best insurance against the problems and for the optimal conditions is the informed teacher.

At present, teachers have several options. We can continue with the present typical basals, which the writer rejects for reasons listed above. We could use books written in inner-city

vocabulary, grammar, dialect and syntax. Initial attempts at this have been made by Dr. William Stewart, but thus far no longitudinal studies with data are available. The writer has found that stringent opposition to these materials from Black teachers precluded even minimal acceptance or success. Future studies may reverse this attitude however.

We could use materials stressing regular spelling patterns, sometimes labelled "linguistic." The writer would reject these also, as being too stilted and unnatural. "The fat cat sat on a mat," is little improvement in this respect over, "Run, run - see Spot run."

The Language Experience Approach seems to provide the most suitable method and material for initial instruction. It avoids many of the problems presented in basal readers, ameliorates some learning problems of the children, and can be done in a manner consonant with optimal learning conditions. The teacher can accept the natural flow of language, the vocabulary, syntax and grammar of the child. Based on the child's own experience, the language experience approach infers an acceptance of the child and his culture. It is advisable to adhere to standard spelling as much as possible.

Absolutely essential within this program is the inclusion of phonics and word recognition skills. The teacher can use the commonly known words from the experience stories to teach the phonic generalizations. These skills cannot be left to osmosis or to the chance that the child will see them. They must be taught.

Although there is no solid body of research data to support any special sequence of phonic skills, the writer has found the following most useful:

initial consonants : m f s p t
short vowel : a

This order avoids confusion of similar visual and auditory cues, and by including a vowel allows whole words and word families to be used early in instruction. Teaching three or four other consonants and short vowel "i" would follow. Thus independent word attack skills would be developed as a natural part of the Language Experience approach.

Many proponents of Language Experience approach advocate it as the sole material and method throughout Grade I - VI. The writer rejects this as being unduly limiting. If used well through Grade II, the children should then be secure enough to move into a variety of published materials - basals, trade books and easy - to - read publications.

Many of these children seem to learn better moving "from parts to wholes," rather than from "wholes to parts". This may account for the writer's preference for materials stressing a synthetic method, when published or commercial materials are used.

In a study of inner-city children comparing one analytic method with one synthetic method, Youtz and Putnam (6, 9) found that at the end of Grade II, the lowest subgroup (as determined by Metropolitan Reading Readiness Tests) in the structured synthetic method were significantly superior to their counterpart in the analytic program in the following: in spelling phonetically words, in spelling a total number of words, and in writing a total number of words. This was done while maintaining equivalence in reading vocabulary and comprehension, as measured by Gates - McGinitie Reading Tests (3), with those in the analytic program.

SUMMARY: What Really Works? Start with a teacher

who accepts the child and his language as it is,

who recognizes that black vernacular language is effective and rich but different

who has patience enough to teach Standard English as a second language,

who is congnizant of the child's special learning problems, and

who will create the necessary climate and conditions required to produce optimal learning.

Use a Language Experience approach in Grades I and II, butressed by a strong structured phonics program springing naturally from their own language. Stress a synthetic method. Move into regular readers, basals and trade books only after sufficient word recognition skills have been mastered to make the transition easy. In the writer's experience, this really works.

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